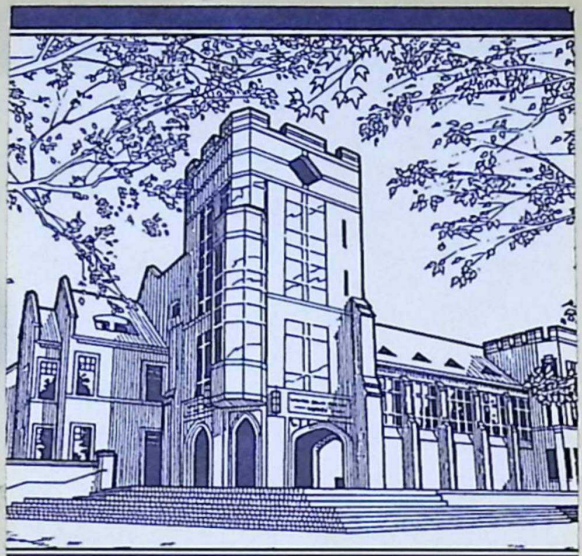
Knowing and Not Doing

A sermon preached March 18th, 1906, in the Fifth Avenue Presbyterian Church by the Pastor, J. Ross Stevenson, D.D.



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Union Presbyterian Seminary
Richmond, Virginia

Knowing and Not Doing.

The text for the morning is so searching in its meaning, so personal in its application, that I tremble to read it, much more to preach about it.

"To him that knoweth to do good, and doeth it not, to him it is sin." —*James iv:17.*

EDUCATION alone will not make a man a saint. There may be as much evil connected with inertia as with ignorance. It is not necessary to be a Christian to believe that there is sin in the world. That the man who transgresses the law of God is a sinner is the truest thing we can say about him. But how a person of understanding who has been well educated; who knows the difference between right and wrong, and is generally respected, can be a sinner, is not so evident. We know, however, that sin is not confined to the lower strata of society. Take Christ's spiritual interpretation of the Ten Commandments; take His obedience to the law as our standard of conduct, and we can see that there is not a single commandment which we ourselves have not broken. But if a man still doubts his sinfulness, let him contemplate his failures. He knows what he ought to do, but he does not

do it. What follows? That he is no worse than most people? That may be admitted. That if he had his life to live over again, he might do better? That may be questioned. James, the practical man of plain speech, tells us that such an one is a sinner. According to the test which he applies, each one of us is brought under condemnation. The assertion of our text is very specific. It does not contemplate mankind *en masse*, but as individuals. To *him* that knoweth to do good, and doeth it not, to him it is sin. Let us each one take these words to himself, and if we do, I believe that we shall find here a personal concession, a personal confession and a personal conviction.

I.

The Personal Concession.

The personal concession:—*I know to do good.* This is not a general platitude to the effect that it is always right to do good. It is specific—I know what is good or right for me to do.

1. Must we not, however, admit that even in a land of Bible privileges, there are many who do not know and who need to be enlightened? There are, to be sure, here in our own country, great throngs of people who should have Christian instruction. Many have come from lands where the system of religion to which they were accustomed, has degraded, rather than developed them, and they have practically no religious life at all, and stand

in desperate need of the gospel. With many others, the training they received in their youth; the efforts of the Church on their behalf, have apparently failed, and they are living in darkness. In numerous instances it will be found that such people do not like to retain God in their knowledge, and hence change the truth of God into a lie. That is to say, they do not use the light they have to get more light, and in each instance, we may say that the man knows to do some good which, however, is not done. In most of our congregations it would doubtless surprise us to discover what a small amount of real vital, energizing knowledge there *is*, and this because so many of us have a convenient way of deflecting the knowledge which does not please us, and does not confirm our own notions as to what we ought to be and do. There are Christians whose character and conduct may be commendable in many respects, but who have strangely perverted notions as to some specific virtues or given lines of duty. Goethe has said if a great man has a dark place in his mind, it is very dark. Even in the minds of good people, there may be dark places into which the truth has not been allowed to enter. Whitfield maintained that the rum trade was essential to the prosperity of America. John Newton testified that he enjoyed sweet seasons with God whilst he was engaged in the slave trade. But a man's partial knowledge does not eliminate sin, because it is due to sin that

he does not have more knowledge. In a country such as this, in the midst of associations such as we enjoy, what is it that prevents people from knowing what is the good for them? *Pride*, for it is impossible for us to see the whole truth, if we allow the warpings and obscurations of vanity, self-sufficiency and prejudice to enter in. *Insincerity*, whereby selfish and unworthy aims which contradict the glory of God injure our faculty of vision, and lead us astray. *Disobedience*, whereby the apprehension of things that are true is forfeited by repeated practical denials of what has been seen.

2. But these admissions do not contradict what I have already asserted, that each one of us knows to do good. The knowledge may be incomplete; it may need reinforcement, but it is there if, in any sense, we can claim to be Christians, and I am speaking only to those who profess to have some knowledge of the truth. You and I accept Christ as God's supreme revelation to man as to what we ought to be and do. We believe in the presence and power of the Holy Spirit to lead us into truth, and to build us up in character. Most of us have been subject all our lives to spiritual influences, and we recognize the voice of God within; conscience the clear witness of duty. We have been taught to pray for divine guidance, and in every time of doubt, the way can be made clear to us. So that if we desire to do good, and wish to know what that good

is, it can be definitely ascertained. This is not some abstract good, delightful to contemplate, and about which we may philosophize, but which has no direct bearing upon life. It is not the good which other people ought to do: we are all experts in that kind of knowledge. But it is the good which *I* should do; which *you* should do; *do* as soon as you leave this house; *do* this afternoon and this evening and to-morrow, and in the days that are to come. Will you say to me: I would love to be what I ought to be, and to follow in the straight line of duty, but I do not know how? He that willeth to do God's will, shall know the teaching. Ask God for light, and you will have it.

I know to do good. Then follows

II.

The Personal Confession.

I do it not.

1. It is not that we despise the good, and ruthlessly reject it. Let it be supposed that we love what is right and true, and are able to talk about it intelligently and commend it forcibly to others. There are, to be sure, many in this city to-day who prefer darkness to light because their deeds are evil, and who spurn the gospel of the grace of God, and are living without hope in the world. But our presence here this morning in a Christian sanctuary on a Christian Sabbath to take part in a Christian service, indicates that we have

some appreciation of what is unearthly, unseen and eternal.

2. It is not that we do nothing good or that there is no good at all in anything we do. There would not be imputed to a man any large amount of self-righteousness if he were to claim for himself that he is not as bad as some people whom he knows, and that he does more good than the average man. People may remonstrate with him because he does so much in the name of Christ. The plea may be urged upon him that because of his health; on account of his business interests; on account of his social obligations, he is doing more than can be reasonably expected of him, and that his burden should be placed upon others. But the humble Christian never takes such an attitude. Indeed, knowing himself, the secret desires of his heart; the good which he has resisted; as he cannot know what is in others, he is bound to feel with Bunyan: "Everyone has a better heart than I have." As a great saint has expressed it: "God has given no one any power of knowing the true greatness of any sin but his own, and therefore the greatest sinner that anyone knows is himself." It was not with any forced humility that the great Apostle called himself the chief of sinners.

3. Therefore, to say nothing of the actual transgressions of the spirit of the law of God which we can discern in our hearts and lives, you and I can see as no one else can see, the

good that has been left undone. Even a man like Andrew A. Bonar was compelled to say as he concluded one year in his life: "This year's omissions have distressed me more than anything." All of us must adopt the confession of the Prayer Book: "We have left undone those things which we ought to have done." We are conscious of this in the home, especially when some dear one is taken away, and we think of the gentle words we might have spoken; of the loving, helpful service we might have rendered. We recall our friends, and it becomes evident to us that we have not done to others what we would have others do to us. Someone has said: "The real ghosts of human life are unwritten letters and unpaid visits." It is not without reason that the petition is included in the Lord's Prayer, "Forgive us our debts"—for these constitute the largest proportion of our sins. Here is a great needy world all about us, and when we confessed Christ, it was with the expectation of making Him known to others; of remedying some of the sorrow and sin of wretched humanity, and we have been like the disciples in the garden, fast asleep while the Master struggled alone. And when awakened by some sudden alarm of conscience, we uttered only a few feeble regrets, and then went to sleep again. We vowed that we would loyally support the church, and cheerfully aid her in all her enterprises, but the call of duty found us, not like good soldiers panoplied for battle,

but like idlers and loafers resting in the barracks, singing our pious song, *"Onward Christian soldiers—marching as to war."* These neglected duties are often the supremely important ones which should have been put first. In the economy of life, much must necessarily be omitted, and it is a mark of strong character to decide in the midst of apparently conflicting duties what must be done, and what may just as well be left undone. But with too many of us, the superior has been set aside for the inferior; the subordinate has thrust out the supreme. James is speaking of the relation of humility and entire dependence in which the creature should stand to the Creator. "Go to now ye that say to-day or to-morrow, we will go into such a city and continue there a year and buy and sell and get gain, whereas ye know not what shall be on the morrow. Ye ought to say, if the Lord will, we shall live, and do this or that." In other words, we ought to spend each day as in the light of eternity, knowing that our time on earth is short. We believe that; are we doing it? It has been remarked "that 'all men are mortal,' is a proposition which each man believes to be true of everyone except himself." Not that anyone seriously believes that he himself will be exempt from death; but each of us habitually thinks and acts as if in his case, death were such an indefinite distance away that practically there is no need to take account of it, at any rate, at present. Hence,

knowing to do good, we do it not, because in our self-confidence and independence we have a mistaken view of life; a wrong perspective. James also intimates in a negative way what our attitude should be to those about us: We are to avoid all harsh judgments; all censorious speech, and fulfil the law of love. In every instance in so far as our conduct relates to others, we are to do the unselfish, the Christ-like thing. We concede that; but can any man claim that he is as charitable, as gentle, as patient toward others as he ought to be, and will always wish that he had been? We may gloss over these omissions with such mild terms as expediency, modesty, forgetfulness, over-occupation, or, at the worst, failure, whereas we know that they may be traced to sloth, selfishness, cowardice, sin—I know to do good; I do it not. What follows? I am a sinner in the sight of God.

III.

The Personal Conviction.

This is a personal conviction which must fasten itself upon each one of us. *I am a sinner.*

1. The word which James uses for sin here means, literally, to miss the mark; to come short of the standard. God sets before us a certain standard of conduct; a standard which we recognize as right, and adopt for ourselves. But we do not come up to it. Scripture calls this sin, and James reminds us that

any omission of duty is charged against us as sin. It is just as really disobedience to God as when a man transgresses the law. Knowledge of what is evil creates an obligation to avoid it, and knowledge of what is good, creates an obligation to perform it. All will admit the former. When an opportunity to do evil presents itself we must at any cost shun it. But many imagine that when an opportunity to do good is offered, we are at liberty to do just as we please. But there is no more liberty in one case than in the other. We are bound to make use of the opportunities to do good. Otherwise, we are sinners, and guilt rests upon us.

2. At once, we will think of the excuses we have urged in declining opportunities of service; and it might surprise us to find how Jesus severely condemned some of these same excuses. For example, a man may treat his privilege of good in this way: I am afraid; I mistrust myself; I might not be equal to the task. But that is what the one-talent man said to his Lord: "I was afraid and went and hid thy talent in the earth." He did not misapply it. He did not employ it for illegitimate speculation. He did not squander it, he simply did nothing. What did Jesus say? "Thou wicked and slothful servant!" There are men to-day who are interested in the cause of truth; who appreciate its dangers, and the opposition there is to it, but they stand aside from an active career, either on the plea that

they have already done all that can be reasonably expected of them, or that they have no gifts; no calling; no opportunities. Whatever explanation they may make for their inaction, they are nevertheless slothful and guilty. Or a man may excuse himself when he knows to do good, and does it not on the ground that he is an exceedingly busy man: There are obligations of a secular character which he is bound to meet; he has his family to care for; his business to attend to; let others who are not so encumbered seize the opportunity. That is what the man said who was invited to the gospel feast: I have a piece of ground, and must needs go to see it. And the Master said of him and of all who were like him: "Not one of those who were bidden shall taste of my supper." Or some one may say: I am not prepared to take life so seriously just yet. I expect in time to devote myself to what is right, but I must enjoy the pleasures of the world for a season. The foolish virgins brought no oil with them except what they had in their lamps, and that was used while they slumbered. At mid-night there was a sudden cry: Behold, the bridegroom cometh! And the foolish ones who had frittered away their opportunities had no oil, and whilst they went in search for some, the door was shut and they could not enter in.

3. Not only is such sin inexcusable, it involves an increasing measure of guilt. According to Christ's own gracious words, a sin

of ignorance calls for leniency, although we say in these days that ignorance is no excuse for crime. A sin against light, against love, against opportunity, demands severity. "That servant which knew his Lord's will, and prepared not himself; neither did according to his will, shall be beaten with many stripes; but he that knew not, and did commit things worthy of stripes, shall be beaten with few stripes, for unto whom much is given, of him, shall much be required. And to whom men have committed much, of him they will ask the more." Does this not teach us the great danger there is in trifling with duty; the great necessity there is of promptly obeying each dictate of conscience? That we should always be even what good people urge upon us, no one will maintain, but that we should invariably do what conscience dictates, no man can dispute. And, then, it is necessary to keep the conscience clear, unwarped by pride and prejudice; unblurred by any acts of disobedience, if we are to meet aright the obligations of life.

"Then keep thy conscience sensitive;
No inward token miss;
And go where grace entices thee,
Perfection lies in this."

Furthermore, since we fail so often, and leave so many things undone, how necessary that we should humble ourselves as penitent sinners before Almighty God, pleading for pardon and for His ennobling grace. The lesson of life when read aright is: that we im-

peratively need Christ. The great Apostle Paul, when he would do good, found evil present with him. When he discovered the law in his members warring against the law of his mind, bringing him into captivity to the law of sin; when he contemplated all the struggle and defeat of the conflict, he cried out: "Oh, wretched man that I am! who shall deliver me from the body of this death?" Who shall deliver me? "I thank God through Jesus Christ our Lord." Without Him no one has ever attained to his ideal of character or of conduct; but with Him you can do all things.